



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

JUN 17 2003

The Honorable Edward J. Markey
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515-2107

Dear Mr. Markey:

Thank you for your letter requesting that the response of the People's Republic of China to the current severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic be addressed during the next World Trade Organization (WTO) roundtable and through the World Health Organization. President Bush appreciates the time you took to write, and he has asked me to respond to you directly.

As of June 9, 2003, 8,421 probable cases and 784 deaths have been attributed to SARS, with 5,328 of these cases and 340 deaths reported from the People's Republic of China. While the public health and economic impact continues to be tallied, the economic burden in the Far East alone is initially estimated at \$30 billion. If Chinese authorities had reported cases in the beginning of the epidemic, the impact of SARS on the world's health and economy would likely have been substantially more limited.

Your concerns regarding the Chinese government's failure to report SARS cases promptly were echoed in Geneva during the recent 56th World Health Assembly (WHA). The WHA passed two resultant resolutions, one specifically on SARS (WHA56.29) and the other on revision of the International Health Regulations (WHA56.28). These resolutions seek to secure enhanced collaboration with the WHO in providing information and responding to infectious disease outbreaks. More specifically, the newly adopted resolutions enhance the WHO's outbreak response capabilities by allowing the WHO to rely on reports from sources other than national governments to issue travel advisories and begin epidemiological investigations.

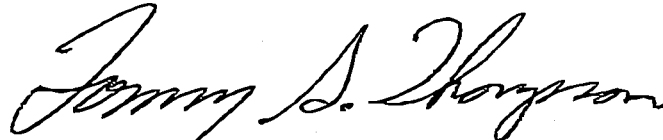
The WHA resolution to revise the International Health Regulations recognizes the role of animals in the spread of human disease and the potential for infectious disease dissemination through international travel and trade. The WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures requires international standards for protecting human health from contaminated food, plants or animals and for protecting animal and plant health through the control of pests. SARS, disseminated through person-to-person contact rather than food or plant, or animal carriers, is more appropriately addressed through an international public health response led by the WHO.

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After pressure from the international community, including from the U.S. government, the Chinese government recognized the severe consequences of failing to openly report probable cases and took bold steps to address this situation, including the removal of the Minister of Health and Mayor of Beijing. In late March, Chinese health officials released dramatically increased numbers of cases and deaths and now are providing daily electronic updates of SARS morbidity and mortality by province and holding televised press conferences. In requesting WHO assistance, Chinese authorities have allowed the WHO, with assistance from my department, to investigate in the affected provinces. Moreover, consistent with your request at the WHA, the United States has supported and Chinese authorities have agreed to the resolution that calls on Member States to be more forthcoming in the future. Given these corrective actions and China's current willingness to cooperate with world health authorities, my department and I are looking to build a long-term working relationship with the Chinese Ministry of Health in a variety of disciplines. I hope this unprecedented opportunity will lead to the creation of a collaborative public health network that will benefit China, the U.S., and the world by monitoring and preparing for pandemic influenza or the next emerging infectious disease threat.

Thank you for your concern for this public health issue. Please feel free to call me if you have further thoughts or questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Tommy G. Thompson".

Tommy G. Thompson